

# Polarization and the breakdown of electoral accountability

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June 26, 2025

# Motivation

1. Secular increases in polarization → What is the effect of polarization on electoral accountability?
2. Prior research has focused on (mass) affective polarization, voters' cognitive and behavioral biases, and voter's tolerance of democratic backsliding.
3. We need a more general analysis of how electoral accountability changes with polarization. In almost all democracies, voters face common decisions regarding incumbent performance, integrity, economic outcomes, corruption, candidate quality, etc.
4. We also need to separate the consequences of affective polarization from "mere" ideological polarization.

# Motivation

- Focus on candidate (elite) ideological polarization, without making assumptions about mass affective or ideological polarization.
- Do not assume the breakdown of voters' epistemic rationality.
- Original experimental evidence from 3 countries (United States, United Kingdom, Spain; total  $N = 4,200$ ).
- Observational analysis of post-electoral surveys in 25 OECD democracies.

## Polarization and accountability: identities and biases

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- Not just polarization of preferences, but polarization of perceptions → decrease accountability.

# Polarization and accountability: identities and biases

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- The breakdown of accountability in polarized societies is driven by voters' partisan sectarianism and in-group biases.
- Partisan sectarianism and affective polarization → increase the prevalence of partisan motivated reasoning in candidate evaluations and responsibility attribution.
- Not just polarization of preferences, but polarization of perceptions → decrease accountability.
- Partisans conceive of politics purely as an “us against them” game, leading them to blindly accept inadequate, incompetent or even dangerous co- partisan candidates.

# Polarization and accountability: identities and biases

A few problems for this theory:

1. Mixed evidence on the extent of actual partisan perceptual differences.
2. Assumption: voters with the same ideological preferences and facing similar levels of candidate polarization would *behave differently* if they could *perceive reality accurately*.
3. This is unlikely, because the roots of affective polarization are often major ideological differences and policy preferences.



## Polarization and accountability: responsible party government

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A few problems for this theory:

1. Mixed empirical evidence.
2. Assumption: policy differences between alternative parties are very high, but there is a sufficiently large group of voters for whom those differences are not very important (and are willing to defect to the other party).

## Polarization and accountability: partisanship

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1. Polarization decreases accountability due to the effect of heightened partisanship and partisan attachments.
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3. The key variable is not ideological or policy polarization, but rather voters' partisanship ties, *irrespective of policy distance* between candidates and voter ideological congruence with each party.
4. However, effects of candidate polarization may occur regardless of the strength of partisan ties in the electorate.

## Polarization and accountability: my argument

1. I assume only that there is candidate ideological polarization, but no assumption on mass ideological or affective polarization.
2. I also assume that voters maintain epistemic rationality.
3. Begin with a simple two party or two bloc competition.
4. Voters often face *electoral dilemmas*: when closest candidate on ideology is the worst on valence, voters cannot simultaneously fulfill all desirable goals.

## Polarization and accountability: Electoral dilemmas

When facing electoral dilemmas, voters must forgo either accountability or ideological/policy representation.

	<b>Ideologically Closest</b>	<b>Ideologically Distant</b>
<b>Good Performance</b>	✓	
<b>Bad Performance</b>		✗

# Polarization and accountability: Electoral dilemmas

**Non-Polarized Politics**

	Ideologically Closest	Ideologically Distant
Good Performance	✓	✓
Bad Performance	✗	✗



**Polarized Politics**

	Ideologically Closest	Ideologically Distant
Good Performance	✓	✗
Bad Performance	✓	✗



## Polarization and accountability: Experimental design

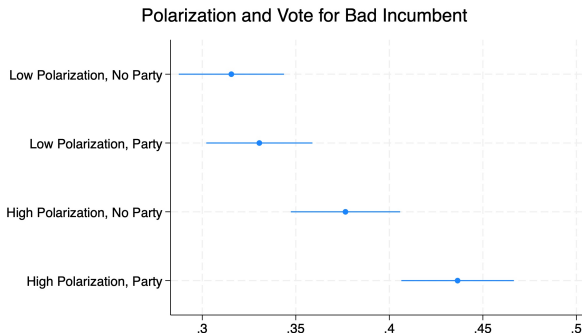
- Original survey experiment in 3 countries: United States, United Kingdom, Spain ( $3 \times 1,400 = 4,200$  respondents)
- All respondents see a two-candidate race. All respondents see an incumbent candidate that has performed poorly in office (economics and integrity). Challenger has neutral valence.
- Candidates also have policy positions on two issues (trade and abortion, trade and immigration, trade and regional autonomy)
- Candidates are affiliated with one of the two major parties; or they are not assigned partisan labels.
- All respondents have to make a candidate choice.

## Polarization and accountability: Experimental design

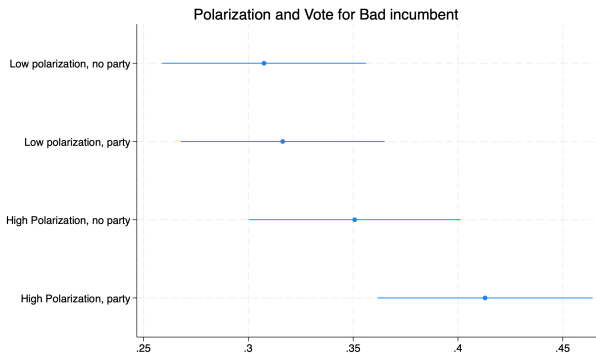
Respondents are randomly assigned to one of 4 ( $2 \times 2$ ) possible groups that vary in level of polarization and partisan identity:

- Non-partisan environment and non-polarized
- Non-partisan environment and polarized
- Partisan and non-polarized
- Partisan and polarized

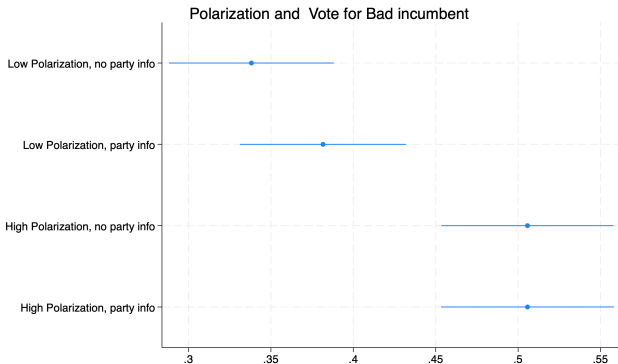
# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results



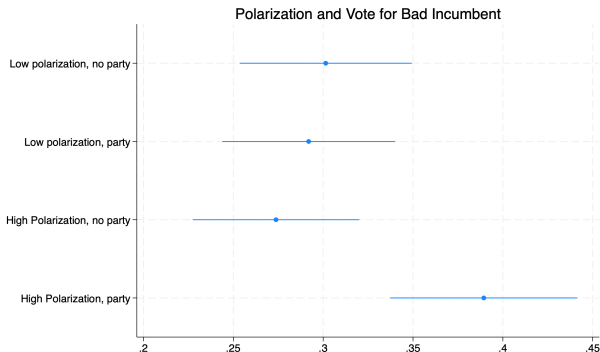
# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results - UK



# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results - USA

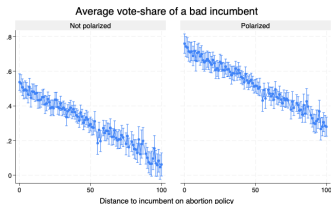


# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results - Spain

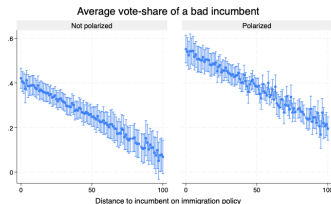


# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results

## United States

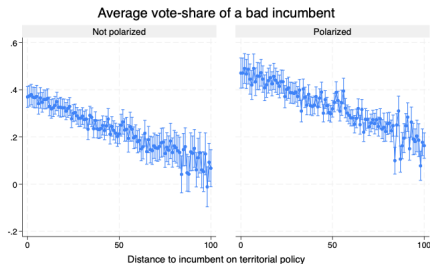


## United Kingdom



# Polarization and accountability: Experimental results

## Spain

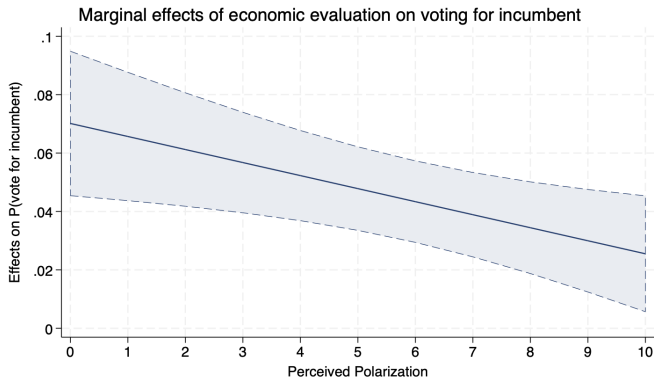




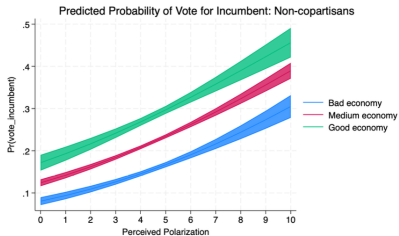
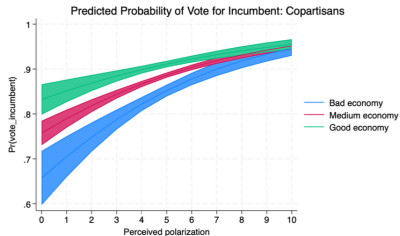
## Polarization and accountability: Observational analysis

- 63 post-electoral surveys collected through CSES in 25 OECD countries from 1996-2021.
- Each respondent states 3 key pieces of data: perception of economy, vote choice, perception of parties' spatial positions from 0-10.
- I compute the perceived polarization in the party system at the respondent level.
- Outcome variable: vote for incumbent party
- Key independent variables: level of perceived polarization and perception of state of economy.

## Polarization and accountability: Observational results



# Polarization and accountability: Observational results



Comments welcome!